

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION/THESIS/RESEARCH PAPER/CREATIVE PROJECT: Semantic Knowledge Development of Second Language Vocabulary among Second Language Learners

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Word knowledge is essential in any aspect of second language acquisition (e.g., Nation, 2001). Despite such importance, even advanced L2 learners continually use L2 words inappropriately (Sonaiya, 1991). The present study attempted to shed more light on successful L2 word meaning knowledge development, which was investigated through an experiment called the semantic judgment test with English near-synonyms.

Non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS) participated in the experiment. All NNS participants were homogeneous EFL learners ($n = 20$) who were enrolled in a four-year program at a university in Japan at the time of investigation. All NS participants ($n = 20$) were those who were working at a military base overseas or freshmen at a university in U.S.

To examine NNS participants' (L2 learners) possible acquisition of L2 specific word-senses, the semantic judgment test was adapted from Jiang (2002, 2004a). This was a paper-pencil type of task where participants were asked to judge whether presented English word pairs ($n = 79$) were related in meaning as quickly as possible.

Data was gathered from the experiment using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed design with three independent variables. The between-subject variable consisted of two groups (NS and NNS group). The within-subject variables were a translation variable and a word-sense variable. The translation variable was operationalized by dividing the group of word pairs according to whether the paired words share the same Japanese translation or not. The word-sense variable was operationalized by how many word-senses the words in each pair shared, especially either they shared only a single word-sense or more than two word-senses. The dependent variable was accuracy of participant's judgment determined by the score based on the semantic judgment test.

The results of a three-way ANOVA yielded mixed findings. First, the NNS participants were still under a strong L1 translation effect when processing L2 near-synonyms. However, the NNS participants showed a native-like lexical performance when the stimuli shared a single word-sense. Furthermore, the present study found a correlational relationship, which suggests that the longer the L2 learners had studied or lived in the country where the target language was spoken, the more successfully they responded in the experiment where they were asked if the stimuli shared a single word-sense.

The results support our prediction of advanced L2 learners' possible achievement of native-like lexical competence when words share only a single word sense, suggesting that acquiring native-like word-knowledge takes a long period of time, but it does not necessarily mean that native-like word knowledge acquisition is impossible. These novel findings have practical implications for the further development of word-meaning knowledge, by contributing empirical evidence to the understanding of the achievement of native-like lexical competence by L2 learners.